

BUILDING MENTAL FITNESS THROUGH PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The problem

As a physical education (PE) teacher since 2004, I have been alarmed by the decline in our students' mental health through the duration of my career. I became a head of year in 2007 and would support approximately three pupils from 160 per year group with mental health issues and the vast majority were girls. Fast forward to 2021 and it is closer to six pupils per class of 25, with both boys and girls being affected and younger and younger children being impacted.

Where are we now?

Intentional self-harm is the biggest killer of 15-24-year-olds in the UK according to the Association for Young People's Health report in 2019¹. Speaking from first-hand experience, each and every one of these deaths devastates families and their wider communities. As a country, we need to do more to predict and prevent these unnecessary deaths. Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) states that one in five children and adolescents across the world has a mental disorder (2019)².

So what has triggered this dramatic decline?

There are some frightening statistics coming out of the USA since social media platforms, such as Facebook, have been available on mobile phones from 2011. In that time, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, incidents of self-harm for teenage girls have increased by 62 per cent in girls aged 15-19 and by an enormous 189 per cent for 10-14-year-olds, with similar increases for suicides. The social psychologist and New York University Professor Jonathan Haidt observed a "gigantic increase" in depression and anxiety as social media has had a dramatic impact on young

people's sense of identity and self-worth and their ability to connect to others. (These data are taken from the Social Dilemma film on Netflix³.) There are also few places for young people to escape from the prison of their phones when going through difficult moments. As a teacher in the UK for the last 17 years, I have witnessed similar frightening increases, with such issues becoming more common and showing no signs of abating, particularly since the emergence of the Coronavirus pandemic. This has exacerbated the problem: 67 per cent of 13-25-year-olds surveyed by Young Minds in 2021 believed that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health⁴.

It is clear that we need a proactive early intervention approach that will empower all of our young people to take control of their mental health. We also need to identify those students who need specialist support as early as possible. Schools are the perfect place to offer such a programme in order to tackle the stigma that surrounds mental health and to help as many young people as possible.

Feeling helpless

I vividly remember when, four years ago, three 12-year-old girls were brought late to my gymnastics lesson. The teacher accompanying them explained that the girls were struggling with anxiety and asked if they could sit out the lesson. As Director of Sport, I felt helpless that I had no strategies to support them and help them to feel better. It prompted me to research this area in more detail so I that didn't have to feel so helpless again.

The solution – Building Mental Fitness

As the Coronavirus pandemic kicked off and the country descended into lockdown for the first time, I used the Easter of 2020 to find a solution so that



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¹ <https://www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk/key-data-on-young-people>

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/facts-in-pictures/detail/mental-health>

³ <https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/the-film/>

⁴ <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports-and-impact/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/?acceptcookies=>



I could help my students. I kept thinking about this question: “We wouldn’t wait for a child to become obese to work on their physical fitness, so why do we wait for children to suffer mental health difficulties before working on their mental fitness?”

I wanted to be proactive and tap into positive psychology so that young people were better placed to cope with difficulties later on. I researched and studied numerous approaches, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and the Mental Fitness model, as well as speaking to leading experts in the field to create a model that would be effective in a secondary school setting.

As the summer wore on, I road-tested these concepts on our students who were children of key workers (and therefore in school), focusing on mindfulness alongside a rigorous, personalised circuit training programme. I was startled by the impact that it had on our relationship, their behaviour and their learning. It also brought our PE team closer as we opened up and discussed our own mental health.

From September 2020, all Key Stage 3 groups and some Key Stage 4 groups at our school, City Academy Norwich, have studied Building Mental Fitness alongside a differentiated yoga programme as part of our recovery curriculum. As time has moved on, students have been offered a wider range of activities depending on their individual needs for mental health benefits. We have experimented with repetitive exercises, such as running and walking, to calm the amygdala and increase students’ window of tolerance. We have also introduced weight-training and boxercise to release tension and used team sports to give students the social aspect that team sports are so great for. By giving students greater choice over the activity, we are seeing them demonstrate greater effort, engagement and progress.

As part of the programme, a lesson on the mental health continuum has helped staff to identify young people who are struggling with their mental health but sneaking under the radar. This helped to identify, on average, three students per class and direct them to additional, specialist support from the school’s social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) counsellor. It also helped to identify three safeguarding issues and put support in place for those students.

Sam, a student in Year 8, said, “My best subject has been PE because my mental health has gone from really low to the highest level it has ever been. I’ve realised that I can turn my problems into solutions for my future. The Building Mental Fitness unit has helped me in many ways, such as building my confidence and my self-esteem. Now my body knows that it can go further than I ever expected and my confidence about my mental health is higher than ever before.”

The programme has evolved with an optional Key Stage 4 group covering the Building Mental Fitness content during ‘Walking for health’ in core PE. It has been fantastic to see the group’s willingness to discuss their own mental health grow and to create a culture of peer-support so the young people know they are not battling their mental health challenges on their own. We have also added a ‘Walking for health’ enrichment activity for Year 7s as part of our innovative UCAN programme to develop cultural capital.

The course content has also been used by PE to impact on the whole school. All Year 8 students have covered Building Mental Fitness in RSHE this year to reinforce the importance of proactive self-care strategies and all form groups cover the content as part of Mindful Mondays, Wellness Wednesdays and Physical Fridays to create and reinforce healthy habits throughout the school. These strategies are then posted on social media so the wider community can benefit from the programme.

With the uncertainty created by Covid, there was also a decrease in staff wellbeing, so a dedicated staff programme was created on Google Classroom. This enabled staff to benefit from pre-recorded videos explaining the strategies in a way that they could access confidentially. The online course was used to upskill all of the PE staff as part of the department's continuing professional development programme and is available to all teachers and support staff within school. Bryony Radley, PE teacher, said, "The Building Mental Fitness course has given me a number of strategies and greatly enhanced my confidence in supporting young people struggling with their mental health".

Our inspirational head teacher, Paul Collin, has placed great emphasis on student wellbeing since he started at the school and we are now reaping the rewards, resulting in calmer, happier young people, enhanced relationships, and improved behaviour, progress and attainment. He said, "It is crucial, now more than ever, to consider how schools and colleges are developing both the academic potential and the wellbeing of every young person. At City Academy Norwich, we place an emphasis on every child having the same opportunity in life. Being mentally fit, happy, energised and productive are key attributes that everyone can benefit from having. Our work with the Building Mental Fitness programme has allowed us to ensure we consider a proactive approach to these areas, working with all of our young people to become the very best versions of themselves and achieve future successes."

The results

The programme's impact has been dramatic, with 94 per cent of students who have completed the unit believing that they feel more equipped to manage their mental health now and in the future with the skills they have been taught. Consequently, we see happier young people and staff, calmer behaviour across our school, increases in progress and attainment, and have attracted new students to our school because of the priority we give to their wellbeing.

The programme was also a major contributing factor to us being awarded the Association for Physical Education (afPE) Quality Mark with Distinction. Former Chair of afPE, Mike Crichton, cited the school's highly effective links between physical education, school sport, physical activity and wellbeing, including a very innovative approach to COVID-19 recovery, as one of the reasons why the school was so successful.

We continue to tweak and improve the course and have plans for our Sports Council to take on a greater role in leading the programme with their peers to improve outcomes further.

The 9 Step Building Mental Fitness Roadmap

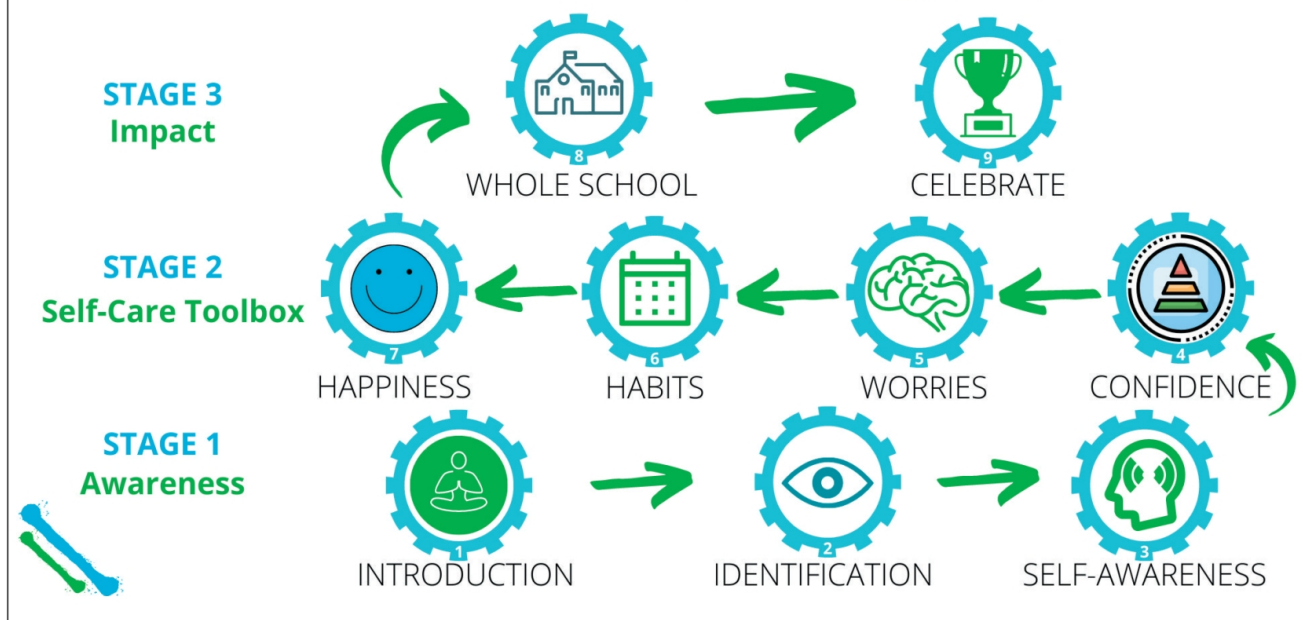
The programme has evolved and been refined into the 9 Step Building Mental Fitness Roadmap. It gives inspirational PE teachers a proven method to transform student and staff wellbeing across the whole school alongside a differentiated exercise programme designed to meet the needs of individual





THE BUILDING MENTAL FITNESS ROADMAP

A proven step by step process that guides innovative teachers to reduce students' anxiety, build their confidence and create a sustainable early intervention wellbeing programme within 90 days.



students. It is an early intervention programme for all, one that reduces the chances of students suffering from anxiety and depression in the future, so that they can thrive academically and personally instead.

In Stage 1, we develop awareness of what building mental fitness means and how we can identify those students who are struggling with their mental health but sneaking under the radar to create a proactive culture around student wellbeing. Identifying students by using the mental health continuum has been particularly powerful for signposting those in need to expert help from our SEMH counsellors and beyond. We then introduce body scanning and journaling to help students to develop self-awareness.

Stage 1 steps

- 1 – Introduction to mental fitness - 🧘
- 2 – Identification - 👁
- 3 – Self-awareness - 🗺

In Stage 2, we equip students and staff with a toolbox of self-care strategies to build confidence and self-kindness, use worries as a positive, raise aspirations, develop healthy habits, and help students understand how to access the four happiness chemicals (endorphins, dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin).

Stage 2 steps

- 4 – Confidence and kindness - 🤝
- 5 – Worries as a positive - 🧠
- 6 – Habits 📅
- 7 – Happiness 😊

In Stage 3, we show staff how to embed the programme across the whole school in seven different ways to have maximum impact and celebrate students' and staff success.

Stage 3 steps:

- 8 – Whole school impact - 🏫
- 9 – Celebrate - 🏆



Should it be the PE teachers' role to improve student wellbeing?

Yes! It can be daunting to step away from the traditional method of delivering PE, but when we look at how many young people are suffering and the lengthy waiting times to receive specialist support from stretched and underfunded providers like Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), then PE departments can definitely play a leading role. I would wholeheartedly argue that PE teachers are extremely well-placed to use the power of PE to make a difference in this vitally important area.

Firstly, PE teachers usually have exceptional relationships with their students, enabling young people to open up about their mental health in a calm and supportive environment. PE is no longer a subject where we just cater for the top 20 per cent who are 'sporty kids'. Yes, it is important to cater for these students as well but I truly believe that we can cater for both as part of a broad and balanced curriculum. I believe we should be focusing on all students and developing healthy habits to have a long-term impact, not just at school but for the rest of their lives.

Secondly, repetitive exercise such as running, walking, swimming and yoga is one of the most proactive ways to reduce anxiety and calm the amygdala. Research into trauma-informed practice states that the brain stem is a key part of the brain and if it is anxious or alerted it will trigger the fight, flight or fright response. Repetitive exercise for a prolonged period of time soothes the brain stem, increases an individual's window of tolerance, and enables them to engage the higher aspects of the brain, such as the Limbic brain then the Cortex brain, which allows us to function more effectively. By increasing the window of tolerance we are seeing better staff/student relationships, improved behaviour, more productive learning and, more importantly, happier young people. If students aren't getting these opportunities in PE, I am unsure where else in school they will receive them.

I believe that PE departments should be at the forefront of this mental health and wellbeing challenge and lead the way. We should be the first line of defence as part of a wider school programme that incorporates social, emotional and mental health counsellors, wellbeing zones, safeguarding provision and specialist support from external providers such as CAMHS.



Join the mission

My mission now is to guide 10,000 teachers so they can give their students a tool box of self-care strategies that give young people the skills to manage their mental health and transform their life chances. I have set up Future Action to provide a whole school online teacher training course with a comprehensive range of editable resources so inspirational PE teachers can create similar programmes within 90 days.

In addition to the original secondary school programme, a Key Stage 2 course has also been created. I worked with primary school teachers and child psychologists to perfect the programme for Key Stage 2 pupils, creating Bobby the Brain as our lead character, to guide children on this journey in a fun and engaging manner.

We are now working with over 30 schools across the world in a range of settings to transform student wellbeing. We have been featured in PE Scholar and I presented a workshop at the afPE National Conference in December 2021. The case study on the next page shares an example from one of these schools.



We have created a free scorecard so you can evaluate your school's current wellbeing provision in two minutes. You will receive a personalised report that will help you to identify areas to take your department to the next level.

To find out more about the programme and to access the scorecard, please visit www.futureaction.co.uk.

If the programme saves one person's life, our work in this area will be worth it! As an example, earlier in this article I talked about feeling helpless when the three girls with anxiety issues were brought to me. I am pleased to tell you that they are now thriving and engaged in Year 11 PE and are on track for some fantastic exam results across subjects and extremely bright futures once they leave us. That is my aim for every student. ■

Neil Moggan [afPE member]

Neil Moggan is Founding Director of Future Action Limited and Creator of the 9 Step Building Mental Fitness Roadmap. He is Director of Sport, Health and PSHE at City Academy Norwich.